

# Exploring Parenthood and Parenting

## AN INTRODUCTION TO "PARENTING-21"

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A major new Institute study, Parenting-21, investigates how ordinary parents in ordinary Australian families are going about the task of bringing up children who are going to live the major part of their lives in the 21st century.

This article sets the context of Parenting-21. Subsequent articles will report on findings from the project and their implications for policy.

**D**uring recent years, throughout the western world, there has been an increasing social and political awareness of such issues as child abuse and neglect, substance abuse by children and young people, youth homelessness, and the like. This has generated an interest among policy makers and service providers in developing programs and services to support parents in the tasks of rearing their children.

In Australia, for example, the Commonwealth Government in association with the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect has recently funded an extensive national pilot of the 'Good Beginnings' home visiting program, as a support to first-time parents. In Victoria, the State Government is supporting the implementation of an extensive parent support and education program in which the activities of nine regional parenting centres are coordinated by a central office which provides research and information back-up. Similar initiatives are underway throughout several other States and Territories.

In parallel with such recent policy and service initiatives, recent years have witnessed among researchers a growing interest in parents' own ideas about the tasks of parenting, about how they are going about the business of rearing children, about the sources they draw upon for their understanding of the nature of childhood, and about the resources they are able to access to support them in their roles as parents.

An important objective underlying this interest has been to understand more about the relationships between what parents think and believe about children on the one hand, and their day-to-day approaches to rearing their children on the other.

### **Parenting and cultural beliefs**

Inevitably, a certain amount of jargon has crept into this research domain as it has emerged into a specialist area. Thus, some investigators speak of themselves as engaged in the study of parents' ideas

about child rearing and child development (Goodnow and Collins 1996; Palacios 1990); others talk about 'parental theories' about children (Sigel 1985), and still others about 'parent's cultural belief systems' or 'ethno-theories' (Harkness and Super 1996).

Despite variability in terminology, what all these approaches have in common is a fundamental assumption that the beliefs, ideas or theories which parents hold about children and the nature of childhood are cultural entities. That is, they are shared between different members of societies and, although they may take on the nature of internalised, personal beliefs or ideas, they are social in origin and are socially transmitted.

The nuances of emphasis and language among the various groups of researchers working in this area are overshadowed by their shared perspective on the simultaneously social and personal nature of parental beliefs or ideas, or even cultural models, about the nature of children and the manner of their rearing. For example, the American cognitive anthropologist, D'Andrade (1992) talks about components of cultural models being 'intersubjectively shared'. What he means by this is that all the members of a social group know that everyone else shares the idea involved, and everyone knows that everyone knows. He could be talking about 'common-sense'!

Sharing ideas and beliefs is an essential part of what it is to belong to a culture. There is social, even survival pressure to becoming familiar with and internalising particular items of cultural belief so as to be able to participate effectively as a member of one's society, and share in and contribute to the common-sense of that society. However, what is accepted as common-sense in one culture might seem novel and not at all common to members of another.

Therein lies one of the fascinations of studying cultural beliefs about parenting in cross-cultural context. Cross-cultural and intra-cultural research has identified differences in specific beliefs about parenting

and childhood and raises questions about how these beliefs are related to particular parenting practices.

For example, generally speaking, North American parents, and paediatricians, regard sleep patterns during early infancy as endogenously determined and believe that establishment of regular sleep-wake patterns occurs according to a biological or developmental timetable which may vary from one individual to the next. In this respect, parents can be 'lucky' or 'unlucky' in getting an 'easy baby' (mature sleep patterns established early) or a 'difficult baby' (mature sleep patterns established late). A wide range of individual differences in the timing of achievement of regularity in sleep-wake cycles are interpreted against this unfolding developmental timetable.

On the other hand, parents in the Netherlands have a different folklore. Traditionally, and in contemporary terms, Dutch parenting in infancy and early childhood is organised around three Rs – *rust, regelmaat eet reinheid* (rest, regulation and cleanliness). These concepts are the centrepiece of advice and encouragement which Dutch parents receive from paediatricians, midwives, health visitors and their own parents. In talking about child rearing, Dutch parents stress regularity throughout the day as being important, not just at sleeping times. Eating, playing, bathing, bedding – all have their time and place, for parents and children alike.

Interestingly, these cultural differences in parental theories about children and child rearing are paralleled by differences in the actual sleep patterns which Dutch and American babies typically display. Whereas American infants are sleeping 13 hours a day in total at three months, at the same age Netherlands babies are sleeping 15 hours per day. The difference in total amount of sleep between American and Dutch youngsters diminishes with increasing age but is still discernible at six years. Further, up to eight years of age at least, Dutch children go to bed significantly



Picture: Double Jay Graphic Design

earlier than their American cousins (Harkness, Super and Keefer 1992).

### **Parents' understanding of parenting**

Parents construct their ideas or theories about parenting through processes of combining implicit and explicit memories of their families of origin with current advice on and experience of rearing their own children.

Based on research with a community of American parents, Harkness, Super and Keefer (1992) proposed three resources that parents use for thinking about their children and about themselves as parents: the remembered family in which parents grew up; informal sources of cultural knowledge, such as friends, neighbours, and relatives; and formal sources, such as books of advice to parents, the media, and culturally appointed 'experts' in child care and child rearing.

To date, comparative research on parents' ideas about child rearing, however, has been limited in terms of the topics and the number of cultural settings

included in any given analysis. In addition, cross-cultural studies of parents' ideas and child rearing practices have often focused on societies that are radically different from each other in such basics as economic development and household structure, making theoretical and practical comparisons problematic (Harkness and Super 1996).

Australia is a country of great cultural diversity in which parents from a range of backgrounds draw upon a variety of models or theories of childhood to inform their child rearing practices while living within a stable, relatively uniform politico-economic system. Accordingly, Australian society presents a potentially highly informative context within which to investigate the impact of cultural models on parenting and child rearing practices.

### **Parenting-21 project**

One of the major projects in the parenting and child rearing theme of the current research program of the Australian Institute of Family Studies is the *Parenting-21*

project. This investigates how ordinary parents in ordinary Australian families are going about the task of bringing up children who are going to live the major part of their lives in the 21st century.

The development of the *Parenting-21* project was influenced by consideration of outcomes from previous investigations of parents' ideas on parenting and child rearing. The project is also informed by an ecological orientation that requires consideration be given to the contextual layers within which parenting and child rearing are embedded. These include: the cultural beliefs about children and childhood which inform parents' approaches to their tasks; the historical and economic contexts within which the tasks of parenting and child rearing are framed; and the social and political attitudes and values that influence the status bestowed upon parents and their children in contemporary society.

Accordingly, the project involves studying the relationships between, on the one hand, parental beliefs, ideas and understanding about the nature of children and childhood, and their child rearing practices on the other. It focuses upon the rearing of children from infancy to middle childhood and examines the values and beliefs parents bring to their task; the aspirations, fears and hopes parents have for their children; their sources of information about children and childhood; from whom they seek help, advice and support when confronted by difficulties; and how all these influence the strategies they use in the rearing of their children.

*Parenting-21* is still in the field; when fieldwork is complete, the data base will contain information on samples of families from several ethnic and cultural communities in Australia, including families from indigenous, European and Asian backgrounds. Each sample will include families with a child who falls into one of five target age groups ranging from early infancy to middle childhood.

In addition to its status as a significant Institute project in its own right, *Parenting-21* is part of an international network of projects known as the International Parents, Schools and Children Research Consortium. The consortium includes teams of researchers from Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United States, all of whom are using comparable instruments and data collection methods. When

results are pooled across all the collaborating groups they will provide a rich source of information about cultural, national and international similarities and differences in how parents across the world are bringing up their children to live in the 21st Century.

### 'Bottom-up' approach to parenting studies

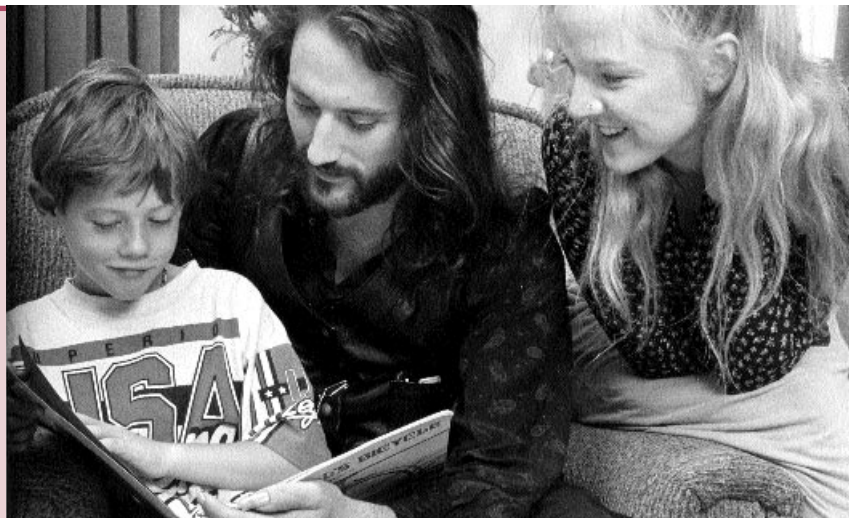
*Parenting-21* has a high degree of practical and policy relevance as well as being informed by a particular theoretical orientation. The project can be interpreted as a 'bottom-up' approach to the study of parenting, reflecting the perspectives of parents themselves about how they go about the task of rearing their children; how they perceive their competence as parents; the aspects of their family and community environments that help them to achieve what they are trying to do with, for and on behalf of their children; the things that get in the way of their being the kind of parents they want to be; and the supports, whether available to them or not, that would facilitate their doing a better job.

Such a 'bottom-up' approach can be contrasted with the 'top-down' expert-driven orientation characteristic of many current parent education initiatives. Top-down programs have been developed, by and large, on the basis of deficit models of parents. They assume that, without input from experts, parents are likely to get things wrong. Such 'expertism', such colonisation of parenting as the provenance of experts, entails the danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy to the extent that it encourages parents to discount their own competence and to believe that they must be instructed by 'experts' so as to achieve competence in child rearing (O'Brien 1991).

By contrast, 'bottom-up' approaches to parenting and to parent support acknowledge that there is no one expeditious model for successfully rearing children but, rather, a wide variety of modes and models (Weisner and Gallimore 1977). Even within the same families, parents adopt different strategies with different children so that, within a single family, parenting may differ in content and be distributed and experienced differently between siblings (Dunn and Plomin 1990). 'Bottom-up' approaches also recognise the extent to which an understanding of the strategies which ordinary parents deploy in the successful rearing of their children can represent an important resource from which to develop user-friendly support services for parents who may be experiencing difficulty in the rearing of their children.

### Future reports from *Parenting-21*

We look forward to reporting the outcomes from the Institute's *Parenting-21* project in future issues of *Family Matters*, and also to reporting on the significance for Australia of the findings from the International Parents, Schools and Children Project.



Picture: Howard Birnsth

## ABOUT "PARENTING-21"

*Parenting-21* is a major study conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. It is the Australian component of a larger collaborative research project – The International Study of Parents, Children and Schools (ISPCS) – involving researchers from Australia (the Institute), Holland, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the United States.

In each country, the samples consist of 60 families with a child in one of five age groups – six months, 18 months, three years, four and a half years, and seven to eight years. Families participate by taking part in a face-to-face interview and completing a seven-day diary and several short questionnaires. Major themes of the study include parental concepts of the nature of childhood, how parents perceive their own child's temperament, and parental sources of support and advice.

In addition to its contribution to ISPCS, *Parenting-21* has been designed to provide a picture of parenting beliefs and behaviours which reflects the diversity of Australia's

own families. Thus *Parenting-21* in Australia is recruiting samples of families from Indigenous, Asian and European backgrounds in Melbourne as well as families from urban, rural and remote areas.

To date, data collection has been completed for samples of families from Anglo-Celtic and Vietnamese backgrounds – a total of 120 families. Families were defined as Anglo-Celtic where the child and parents were Australian born, with grandparents born in either Australia or the United Kingdom. Vietnamese families were included where the child was born in Australia, with parents and grandparents born in Vietnam. Recruitment of families from Aboriginal and Islander communities is still underway.

When data collection and analysis are complete, the findings from *Parenting-21* will constitute a valuable resource for policy makers and service providers concerned to support Australian parents in their tasks of rearing the nation's children.

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